

This weekend, U.S. Representative Mike Quigley (IL-05) spoke with CNN regarding the HHS ban on gay and bisexual male blood donors. A transcript of this interview is included below. An accompanying CNN.com article on the subject and Rep. Quigley's efforts to revise the policy can be [found here](#). Rep. Quigley recently authored a [letter to HHS with more than 60 of his colleagues](#) urging for a review of the policy.

Anchor: Thank you and good morning to both of you

Rep. Mike Quigley: Good morning

Anchor: Let me start with you on this one, take us through what happens to our blood after it's donated. Is all blood tested for HIV and AIDS?

Arthur Caplan: Well, the first thing that happens is you get asked a series of questions to try to rule out people who are deemed at high risk, and gay men are part of that. Then, all the blood that's donated is tested for a variety of diseases like hepatitis, HIV, even rare diseases like Chagas Disease. The most important thing is then the blood is almost always pooled together. You don't really keep it in one pint donations, you mix it up. The theory is, you have to be careful about safety because you're combining blood so you could expose a lot of people if only one donation is infected.

Anchor: And Congressman, I understand you're working with Senator John Kerry and more than 60 other politicians to get this ban reexamined. What is the goal? A less restrictive ban or no limits at all?

MQ: No, I think it's a less restrictive ban, remember, the technology has changed so dramatically in blood screenings in the last twenty something years. And we know so much

more about risky behavior. What we're proposing is a nuanced change to this ban so the gay men are allowed to give donations. This is also ordered by the American Medical Association and the blood banks. And by the way the blood banks themselves have said this lifetime ban is medically unwarranted.

Anchor: Did this ban, at one point, make sense? At one time?

Caplan: It did at one time. Way back at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, it really had a terrible impact on people with hemophilia who rely on blood products every day. Their population got decimated by AIDS. Just a kind of holocaust among that group. We didn't have good reliable tests at that time, we didn't even know what we were looking for at the start of the AIDS epidemic. But it doesn't make such sense today because, as the Congressman said, we have very very good testing now. Saying that you can't donate is you've had male to male sex since 1977 doesn't make a lot of sense today. It did then, doesn't now.

Anchor: So do you agree with the Red Cross that a year off between sex with another man should be sufficient?

Caplan: Absolutely. A number of other countries are going this route. Italy, Spain, Australia, Britain, Japan and they haven't encountered any problems. And I think the biggest thing for viewers to understand that the threat they face today is not safety in the blood supply, but having it there when you need it. We don't have enough blood. People aren't donating blood enough. Some in this group want to donate. You're more likely to get into trouble because there's no blood to give you than the safety of the blood given the testing that's available.

Anchor: In terms of numbers, Congressman, if you allow gay men to donate, it would really help solve the problem. If you look at the numbers, more than 53,000 men would likely make more than 89,000 blood donations.

MQ: Absolutely, this is a matter of life and death, and we're turning away over 50,000 healthy men who want to donate blood. It makes absolutely no sense, and it's very rare that we can solve a discrimination problem at the same time that we can solve a public health problem.

Anchor: Whether the ban is a month or a year or a lifetime, isn't the ban still a discrimination of some sort?

MQ: Well I think the current discrimination is against gay men. I think the nuance here is that people who engage in risky behavior, whether they are gay or straight, their blood should not be allowed into the supply. But we all know many, many gay men who are in long term monogamous relationships, gay or straight, people who are in those relationships and practice safe sex, people who are healthy, should be allowed to donate.

Anchor: And, correct me if I'm wrong, but heterosexual people donating are not asked these questions about their risky behavior.

MQ: Well not in the same manner. I think that's unfortunate. A straight person who has unsafe sex with multiple partners can give blood, and I think that creates more of a risk than a gay person in a monogamous relationship.

Anchor: We did reach out to HHS and were told that in March they submitted a request to the federal register to identify interests and obtain information about blood donation among gay men and "no decision has been made yet to proceed with the pilot." I mean what do you think? Is it enough that they just might study this?

Caplan: Well I was chair on the Advisory Committee on Blood Safety and Availability for the country in 1999 to 2001 and we were trying to change the policy then and thought we had enough information to make a recommendation for change. We're already more than 10 years out so I'm not sure you need to study this anymore, what you need to do is open your eyes to the liability of testing, to the shortage of blood out there that puts all of us at risk, to realize if you want to be on the very, very safe side, put on a one year ban instead of this 1977 one time life ban. I think that will serve the public health best, and I think the time to change, as other countries are doing, is now.

Anchor: Congressman, I give you the final word.

MQ: And you have to remember that HHS, spurred by our letter, has admitted now that the process is “suboptimal.” Something only a government bureaucracy could say. In the mean time, we need a blood transfusion every 2 seconds in the United States. We need to solve this problem.

Anchor: Suboptimal doesn’t cut it when the need is that great. Congressman, thank you very much. Art Caplan, nice to see you as well.

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